

# *Farce/Farts: Divergent Styles Of Comedy In Medieval France*

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The French theatre, as is well known, grew out of the ceremonies of the medieval church. It is usual to distinguish between two theatrical traditions which had their origin in ecclesiastical or para-ecclesiastical ceremonies: the so-called 'serious' or 'high' theatrical tradition derived from the mystery and morality plays, and the 'low' or *farce* tradition, derived from the peculiar activities associated with the Feast of Fools (*la Fête des Fous*).

What I want to argue is that the Feast of Fools was at the origin of not one, but two increasingly distinct styles of performance, which I shall characterise for the sake of brevity as belonging to the 'farce' tradition and to the 'farts' tradition. The first is a tradition relying primarily on the use of *words*, and is thus the subject of literary history: it leads ultimately to the development of French classical comedy (notably that of Molière) in the seventeenth century, and is later reborn in a different guise towards the end of the nineteenth century in the work of Georges Feydeau and others. While Molière retains certain elements of the medieval farce (as indeed of its cousin the *commedia dell'arte*) in a number of its works – though these have all-but disappeared in the 'high' comedies such as *Le Misantrophe* – Feydeau's themes, on the other hand, are no more than very distant nineteenth- and early twentieth-century relatives of their medieval ancestors.

As to the other tradition, the 'farts' tradition, it is based not on words but on *actions*: these include fart jokes, but also comprise various other forms of carnival presentation, including cross-dressing, masquerade, and general revelry and high spirits. Like the farce tradition, it has its origin in the Feast of Fools, but the two styles of performance tend to move further and further away from each other after the expulsion of the Feast of Fools from the church building. The farce then

becomes more and more a bourgeois theatrical form, while the farts tradition maintains a more resolutely popular style of expression, finding its home in the Carnival or what the French call the *fête populaire*. It is the subject of cultural, rather than literary, history, although some literary historians do extend the definition of the 'stage' to include popular spectacles and pageants.

Let us begin with a brief description of the Feast of Fools. Its dates were not definitively fixed – certainly not by the official church (which at best tolerated it and more usually condemned it) – and in some parts of France it began earlier or ended later than in others. In general, however, it ran between Christmas and Epiphany, being thus the French equivalent of the Twelve Days of Christmas, culminating in the celebrations of Twelfth Night<sup>1</sup>.

As far as one can tell, the elements inserted into the formal liturgy during this period were originally quite innocuous in nature, rather following the model of the little acted scenes at Jesus' tomb which might be inserted into the Mass at Easter-tide. But gradually, the insertions or interpolations – the 'stuffing' which is the original meaning of the French word *farce* (from *farcir*, to stuff) – which were introduced in the post-Christmas period took on a less and less reverent form and eventually became quite the opposite of pious worship. It is possible, as some writers have suggested<sup>2</sup>, to recognise here the vestigial persistence of those Saturnalia celebrations that had lingered on in parts of Gaul even after the Romans had marched away. Whether or not that is so, the post-Christmas ceremonies did tend to move more and more in the direction of bawdy if not pagan revelry, and one can see how that might come about.

On Christmas Eve, for instance, in Rouen, Beauvais and other cathedrals<sup>3</sup>, there was from the twelfth century onwards a liturgical scene performed in honour of the donkey, whose role in the Christian story had been a favourite theme of St Augustine : in front of the cathedral doors was sung the prose sequence known as *Orientis partibus*, which began with the words

- 1 It sometimes ran until the octave of the Epiphany. See Oxford Companion to French Literature, article *Fête des Fous*.
- 2 See Gaignebet C., *Le Carnaval: essais de mythologie populaire*, Paris, Payot, 1974, pp. 43-44. Accounts of the *Fête des Fous* are to be found in most standard works which refer to medieval French farce. See in particular Milner Davis J., *Farce*, London, Methuen 1978; Vloberg, M., *Les Noël's de France*, Grenoble, Arthaud 1934; Auguet, R., *Fêtes et spectacles populaires*, [Paris], Flammarion. The oldest, and still one of the best, accounts, is Fournel V., *Les Spectacles populaires et les artistes des rues*, Paris, Dentu 1863.
- 3 On Rouen, see Vloberg, op. cit., p. 44; on Beauvais, see Fournel, op. cit., p. 31.

Orientis partibus  
Adventavit asinus  
Pulcher et fortissimus,  
Sarcinis aptissimus<sup>4</sup>.

The donkey or ass, along with the ox, was after all traditionally present at the Christmas manger scene. It was not long before the donkey itself came to be the subject of the celebration, and at the end of the Kyrie, Gloria, Epistle and Credo, the deacon would shout: '*Hi! han!*' ('Hee Haw!'), and the same exclamation was repeated at the end of Mass: '*Ite Missa est. Hi! han!*' To which the people replied: '*Deo gratias. Hi! han!*'<sup>5</sup>. The next step was the introduction of the donkey into the actual service, with unpredictable consequences: as François Caradec points out, 'The loud braying of Sir Ass, as well as his farting and perhaps an untimely erection, would have elicited the amusement of those present'<sup>6</sup>.

From Christmas Day onwards, each day had its own liturgical tomfoolery, with the various lower orders in turn taking over the ceremonies. The feast of St Stephen (Boxing Day) was reserved for deacons, St John the Evangelist for priests, and so on. Each of these orders would choose a mock bishop, even a mock Pope, who would be in charge of the revelry and be the recipient of honours in a parody of the liturgy. The celebration on 28 December of the Feast of Holy Innocents (the slaughtered children) provided a similar opportunity for the choristers. Here, in a number of French cities, a child was chosen to be dressed up as a bishop, processing around the church, being enthroned and giving his blessing to the congregation<sup>7</sup>. In some places, children drove the priests out of their stalls in the choir. Such customs continued well into the sixteenth century, sometimes accompanied by other elements interpolated into the liturgy. Here is one description of, or complaint about, what might take place during the Feast of Holy Innocents:

'They dress in priestly robes, torn and turned inside out; they hold in their hands books turned upside down and wrong way round, which they pretend to read; they blow into the censers which they swing around in ridicule, making the ash fly into their faces or those of the others; sometimes they mumble confusedly, at others they utter cries as mad, as unpleasant and as dis-

4 'From the East arrived the ass, beautiful and very strong, very suited to bearing burdens.' See Caradec F., *La Farce et le sacré: Fêtes et farceurs, mythes et mystificateurs*, Paris, Casterman 1977, p. 43.

5 Quoted in Vloberg, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

6 Caradec, op. cit.

7 Fournel, op. cit., pp. 34-36.

cordant as those of a herd of swine'<sup>8</sup>.

Other examples could be listed, all of them having in common a radical departure from, indeed an overturning of, the accepted customs. Although the hierarchy sometimes railed against these extravagant goings-on – in fact, the little that we know about these elements of *farce* or 'stuffing' is based largely on the descriptions given in episcopal letters complaining about them – they tended to move from being well-intentioned embroidery on some theme or character from the Gospel, into being performances or celebrations in their own right, as the remaining vestiges of the Saturnalia reasserted themselves.

There is another parallel with the Saturnalia, and an important one. For they, like the medieval liturgical interpolations, were a kind of implicit licence for an overthrowing, a reversal, of the established social order. In the Saturnalia, which ran from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, slaves would don the purple robe and white toga of free Roman citizens, and for a while their masters would serve them. In a church ruled by a strictly defined hierarchy, the mocking of sometimes unintelligible Latin responses by turning them into a donkey's braying, or the lampooning of pompous episcopal behaviour by dressing up a child in bishop's robes, provided a welcome relief from the constraints of a heavily regulated society. Regulated not only socially, but ecclesiastically: respect for the Church, after all, meant not only the difference between salvation and damnation, but potentially the difference between life and death (burning at the stake was, let us not forget, an available punishment). The popular recognition – and, for a time, ecclesiastical toleration – of these practices provided, in Andrew Horton's words, 'the freedom to turn the world as we know it upside down and inside out without fear of punishment, pain or consequence'<sup>9</sup>. Like the Saturnalia, the short-term reversal of roles provided a kind of outlet for the lowest strata of society, a period during which they could play at being the masters; in this case, it was the laity (along with the lowest clerical orders) who for a time took control of what was normally the prerogative of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Its theological justification, which inhibited its over-zealous interdiction by the authorities, could be found in the *Magnificat*: *Deposuit potentes de sede, et exaltavit humiles* ('He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek.').

8 Quoted by Gaignebet, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

9 Horton, A. [undated], *Laughing Out Loud*, quoted in Clark, J.P., *Laughing Matters, or, in Praise of Folly*, on-line article (<http://www.britannica.com/bcom>).

The reversal of social order (and thus of political power) was, of course, only one of the areas in which the Feast of Fools permitted the acting-out of a topsy-turvy society: cross-dressing was another such manifestation, having nothing to do – at least overtly – with homosexuality or transsexuality. Whilst the Feast provided an opportunity for release from strict social regulation, we should remember that, just as importantly, its implicit recognition by the authorities sanctioned such behaviour on the basis that it lasted for *a set period only*, safe in the knowledge that at the end of that period the established order would resume.

It is when the Feast of Fools is expelled from the church building and enters the market-place that its message is broadened into a critique of the social order generally, and that it is no longer restricted to a certain period of the church calendar. In the course of the fifteenth century there arise groups of performers, known as *confréries joyeuses*, bodies not unlike what we today would call ‘amateur dramatic societies’, who perform scenes or playlets usually written in octosyllabic couplets and generally adopting the word *sot* to describe themselves, rather than the word *fou* used in the *Fête des Fous*. [Although we translate the expression *la Fête des Fous* as the Feast of Fools, it is more strictly the Feast of Madmen: the word *sot* is more strictly the word for a fool.] And so we have a group calling itself the *Confrérie de la Mère Sotte*<sup>10</sup> (the Confraternity of Mother Fool – a role, incidentally, played by a man) amongst other groups, performing playlets known as *soties*. A reminder of the background of these performers in the Feast of Fools can be found in the donkey-ears which became transformed into the fool’s cap which was worn by some of the groups. There is not space here for a full account of the array of medieval farce performers, but this subject is well covered in standard works such as Jessica Milner Davis’s study and others<sup>11</sup>. These groups include the clerks of the *Basoche* and the *Enfants sans souci*.

Given that the members of the confraternities were men of a certain education and that some of them, such as the clerks of the *Basoche*, occupied minor positions in the civic administration and court system, it is not unnatural that some of their performances dealt with the social order, with unscrupulous higher officials often being outsmarted by their juniors. In other cases, the situation was

10 See *Oxford Companion to French Literature*, article *Sotie*. Caradec (1977) refers to *La Mère Folle* (p. 45), but this appellation is not attested elsewhere.

11 Davis M., op. cit., pp. 10-13. Cf. *Oxford Companion to French Literature*, articles *Farce*, *Sotie*, *Fête des Fous*, *Basoche*, *Enfants sans souci*. See also Bédier, J. and Hazard, P. [eds] (1948), *Littérature française*, t. I, Paris, Larousse, article *Le théâtre comique*, p. 138 ff.

more of a domestic nature, nagging wives and put-upon husbands being a particularly popular theme, though this particular inversion of the desirable social order needs to be put right again (an example of attitudes which today's society would find unacceptably sexist). In the celebrated *Farce du cuvier*, for example, the hen-pecked hero Jacquinot is given by his wife a list of all the jobs he is to do around the house, including helping at the washtub; later in the farce, she herself falls (or is pushed) into the tub and calls out to her husband to get her out – to which he responds by saying that this is not on the list of tasks she gave him to do.

Let us move on to what is generally considered the finest of all medieval French farces, known as *La Farce de Maître Pierre Pathelin*. Written probably between 1461 and 1469<sup>12</sup> and the work of an unknown author, it is the story of a rascally lawyer (Pathelin) who tricks a draper out of a piece of cloth. The draper also discovers that he is being robbed of his sheep by his shepherd. The latter case goes to court, and Pathelin is hired as the shepherd's lawyer. His advice to the shepherd is that, whenever he is asked a question, he should respond by bleating (*Bée*), the explanation to the judge being that he has spent too long in the company of his sheep. Needless to say, the draper recognises Pathelin as the man who tricked him out of his cloth. The two cases keep becoming mixed up, the judge making continued attempts to get the parties to 'return to their muttons' (*Revenons à ces moutons*), a phrase which was to enter the language. Eventually, the shepherd is allowed to go free, the judge concluding that he is an idiot. Pathelin, delighted that his advice to the shepherd has proved successful, now demands his fee – to which the shepherd merely responds: *Bée*.

*Pathelin* contains many of the elements of the standard farce: Pierre Pathelin's wife appears early, nagging at him for having no money and thus provoking him to his duping of the draper, and in this we can recognise a common medieval farce-theme. When the draper comes to collect the money owed to him, Pathelin (with his wife's assistance) feigns illness and in his supposed delirium talks nonsense in half-a-dozen different dialects and finally in Latin – another standard element of the farce style which Molière was to take up two centuries later in his play *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*. Pathelin is himself the prototype of the rascal whose side we are on – another type of character later developed by Molière, though usually in the form of a wily manservant such as

<sup>12</sup> These are the dates suggested by F.K. Turgeon (1964), *Cinq Comédies du Moyen Age à nos jours*, New York, Holt, Rinehart, p. 4. Lagarde, A. and Michard, L. (1955), *Moyen Age: Les Grands auteurs français*, p. 168, suggest a date between 1460 and 1465.

Sganarelle in his *Dom Juan* (who became Leporello in the da Ponte/Mozart version, *Don Giovanni*) and whose ultimate incarnation is Figaro.

The most interesting aspect of the play is perhaps the twist at the end : for it adds to the usual farce-theme – that of the wealthy and unlikable character being duped by an amiable rogue – a new development, in that the rogue is himself out-twitted by someone even more cunning than he. It is precisely this subtlety of dramatic situation, and indeed the movement beyond reliance on situation and towards the development of character, which led the great critic Gustave Lanson to claim that *Pathelin* (despite its title) is not in fact a farce but a comedy<sup>13</sup>. There is some point in this notion, though perhaps a preferable view is that the expression ‘farce’ means different things in different ages, so that *Pathelin* may simply be considered a different *form* of farce from that of the stock medieval examples, just as the work of Feydeau and others some 450 years later can still be called ‘farce’ even though it is a very different form of the genre. Consultation of any good French dictionary will indicate what a wide variety of dramatic works have been included under the heading of ‘farce’ in France alone – not to mention the different applications of the word in English and other European theatre.

To return now to the alternative tradition, one of the most interesting – and informative – of the practices originating with the Feast of Fools and later developed in the Carnival was precisely the public farting of which mention was made above. The highly original study by Claude Gaignebet, *Le Carnaval*, is the most authoritative guide to the French carnival tradition, which although centred on Mardi Gras covers the entire period from the Feast of Fools to the beginning of Lent. Gaignebet’s thesis is that, to have a correct understanding of the spirit of the carnival, one needs to comprehend properly the notion of the *fou* – not merely a clown on the one hand, or an insane person on the other, but someone possessed by a form of innocence.

‘To be a madman [*fou*],’ he writes, ‘is to have one’s head sufficiently emptied, one’s spirit sufficiently liberated from day-to-day preoccupations, to allow the *pneuma* [the Greek word for spirit] to fill us and to speak directly through our mouths. [...] It is in this very positive sense of madness that St Paul speaks of the foolishness of the Cross and the foolishness of Christ’<sup>14</sup>.

In this sense, Gaignebet argues, we can understand the rites of the Feast of Fools in their full significance. It was not simply a matter of turning upside-down the order of the world, but also of emptying one’s head of the world’s wisdom in

13 Lanson, G. (1951; original ed. 1894), *Histoire de la littérature française*, Paris, Hachette, p. 219.

14 Gaignebet, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

order to allow the spirit to enter. It was, as it were, a way in which the humblest lay-person could receive the Holy Spirit without (or even in defiance of) episcopal authority.

The chief ritual means of achieving this state was by the consumption of food which caused flatulence, notably the consumption of beans – the *fève*, or broad bean, rather than the string bean or *haricot*. And so were born the ceremonies of the Feast of Kings (*la Fête des Rois*), which in England were celebrated on the eve of the Feast, the 5<sup>th</sup> of January (known as Twelfth Night). To this day, the Feast of Kings – the Epiphany – is celebrated in France by the eating of a special cake, containing a small token still known as a *fève* or bean. The person who finds the *fève* in his or her slice of the cake is proclaimed king or queen (originally, only the men feasted on beans, one of them being proclaimed king and being able to choose his queen); and indeed, in England too the ceremonies of Twelfth Night were marked by the appointment of the Bean King<sup>15</sup>. Gaignebet points out that the post-Christmas (i.e. post-midwinter) celebrations were a kind of foreshadowing of the coming Spring, always associated with flatulence. In French folklore, for instance, the hibernating bear looked out of its cave at this time, and if Spring was on the way it marked the event by farting<sup>16</sup>. We may compare the thirteenth-century English poem *Sumer is icumen in*, with its phrase

*Bulluc stertet, bucke vertet*  
[‘The bullock starts up, the buck farts’]<sup>17</sup>

as another example of this tradition, which is also found in France in the thirteenth-century *Roman de Renart*<sup>18</sup>.

Whilst the more bourgeois tradition of the farce was continued and developed mainly in centres of learning, and notably in Paris, the alternative style of performance (that of the Carnival) was equally strong – at times stronger – in provincial centres and small towns. Profoundly rooted in folk-memory, it was the people’s celebration and has to some extent remained so even in its later (and contemporary) manifestations.

15 See Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, article *Twelfth Night*.

16 See Gaignebet op. cit., p. 11, p. 123.

17 Anon., c 1250. Cf. Jeffares, A.N. (1955), *Seven Centuries of Poetry*, London, Longmans Green. Professor Jeffares glosses *vertet* (or *verteth*) as ‘harbours in the green’. This is incorrect: see *OED* under ‘fart’.

18 ‘Segnors, dist il, venez grand oire! L’archeprestres commenche a poire’ (*Renart*, Br. Vii, v. 388). *Poire* (or *poitre*) – from Latin *pédere* – was replaced about 1380 by *péter*, ‘to fart’.

It is an enormous simplification, but not without a grain of truth, to observe that, in the Paris of a hundred years ago, people in search of comic entertainment might make their choice of venue according to the social class to which they belonged: while the educated upper classes might choose to watch a high comedy by Molière at the Comédie-Française, the bourgeoisie might prefer to take in a Feydeau farce at the vaudeville theatre, and the lower classes might choose to attend the variety theatre where (amongst the jugglers, strongmen, knife-throwers, ventriloquists and the like) they could have the experience of being present at a performance by Joseph Pujol, known as *Le Pétomane* ('the fart-fanatic'), who amongst other remarkable skills could extinguish a candle by breaking wind from half-a-metre away. As the dictionary so elegantly puts it, he was 'capable of controlling his intestinal gasses and modulating their pitch'<sup>19</sup>. [Whilst prodigiously skilled, the *Pétomane* was by no means unique in his field: the royal courts of France had been familiar with court entertainments based on controlled flatulence; and indeed the great sixteenth-century philosopher Montaigne quotes St Augustine as considering control over the breaking of wind to be proof of the supremacy of the human will<sup>20</sup>.] True, the social significance of the fart joke has been somewhat attenuated since the time of the medieval carnival and the Feast of Fools; no longer a temporary reversal of social norms but rather a way of re-asserting the fundamental (no pun intended) role of the body in a society where bodily functions have, for the last three centuries or so, been discreetly unmentionable in polite company. In such contemporary manifestations as the Japanese performers known as the Tokyo Shock Boys or the American TV series *The Simpsons*, the fart joke still carries with it the connotations of naughtiness, of the breaking of a social taboo; while in other contexts – Gay and Lesbian Pride marches, for example – cross-dressing still retains an element of shock value (though admittedly less so in cities such as San Francisco or Sydney where such events have almost become institutionalised).

Whilst the farce tradition has lost all traces of its medieval origin in the Feast of Fools, the alternative performance-style still retains something of the spirit of the ancient festivities. Part of it is, to be sure, the spirit of sheer fun, of the taking of 'time out' – albeit for a short period only – from the instrumental nature of life in contemporary society. But there is another side as well, which has been well characterised by the theologian Harvey Cox. He writes:

'The Feast of Fools [...] had an implicitly radical dimension. It exposed the arbitrary quality of social rank and enabled people to see that things need not always be as they are. Maybe that is why it made the power-wielders uncomfortable and eventually had to go. The divine right of kings, papal infallibility, and the modern totalitarian state all flowered after the Feast of Fools

disappeared<sup>21</sup>.

Whatever the fate of the Feast of Fools, the demise of the medieval farce is probably not to be lamented : as the great nineteenth-century critic Lanson was the first to point out<sup>22</sup>, it was lacking in tenderness and charity, it reduced morality to the shame of being duped by someone smarter than you, and one of its favourite themes was domestic antagonism, with an accent on misogyny. The alternative mode of performance, on the other hand, remains alive and vibrant to this day : though somewhat transformed in nature, it is at one and the same time a reminder of how far we have come since the Middle Ages, and of the need for perpetual vigilance against social tyranny. To quote again the words of Harvey Cox, which are even more relevant in 2001 than they were when he wrote them in 1969:

‘In a success- and money-oriented society, we need a rebirth of patently unproductive festivity and expressive celebration. In an age that has quarantined parody and separated politics from imagination we need more social fantasy. We need for our time and in our own cultural idiom a rediscovery of what was right and good about the Feast of Fools’<sup>23</sup>.

This comment may serve perhaps as a summary of what this article sets out to assert. In preparing the article, however, and in reflecting on the apparently flip-pant topic I have chosen to discuss, I was reminded of some words of the great Talmudic scholar Saul Liebermann, writing about the Kabbalah. His words could well apply to any discussion of topics such as the present one. ‘Nonsense (when all is said and done),’ says Liebermann, ‘is still nonsense. But the study of nonsense, that is science’<sup>24</sup>.

### *Farsowe baki - style średniowiecznej komedii francuskiej*

Wyrzucenie *Uczty głupców* z kościoła jest zwykle uznawane za moment narodzenia się farsy w średniowiecznej Francji. *Uczta* zapoczątkowała rozwój dwu nurtów nowej tradycji komediowej. W jej wystawieniach odgrywano odwrócenie ustalonego porządku społecznego oraz porządku kościelnego.

Pierwszy nurt – farsowy – został podchwycony przez grupę aktorów, określających się jako współbracia głupców (*confraternites des sots*). Przedstawienia bazują zwykle na

21 Cox H., *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*, New York: Harper & Row 1970, p. 5.

22 Lanson G., 1951, p. 218.

23 Cox H., op. cit., p. 6.

24 Quoted by Schama S., *Landscape and Memory*, London: Fontana Press 1995, p. 134.

dialogu. Ich tematyka dotyczy obyczajów, a farsowymi bohaterami są próżniacy mężowie, gderające żony, kler albo lokalni urzędnicy. Stopniowo farsa staje się gatunkiem coraz bardziej wyrafinowanym. Kładziono większy nacisk na rozwój akcji oraz przedstawianych postaci. Za szczytową postać średniowiecznej farsy należy uznać osiągnięcia *Pierra Pathelina*. Jest to zarazem początek nowego francuskiego gatunku – *komedie*, poprzedzającej o dwa wieki Moliera.

Drugi nurt wywodzący się z *Ucztę głupców* jest charakterystyczny raczej dla karnawału niż dla scenicznej farsy. Większą rolę odgrywają w nim czyny niż słowa. W odwracaniu ustalonego porządku wykorzystuje się przebieganki i grube żarty, co odzwierciedla potrzebę uwolnienia się od opresywnego porządku społeczno-religijnego. Ta tradycja utrzymała się przez wieki zarówno w karnawale (i w dworskiej tradycji), jak też na francuskiej scenie wodewilowej w przedstawieniach takich jak *Le Petomane*. Dzisiaj reprezentują ją występy Tokyo Shock Boys oraz demonstracje takie jak parady gejów (np. Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras).